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Giftng, storyng, poetic inquiry, making, relational care

Abstract: Four mothers in academia collaboratively story their lived encounters, bringing differing identities, circumstances and experiences of collective exhaustion. They do this by creatively writing lived experiences, sharing these with each other, holding and feeling these lived encounters over time then creatively responding back with gifted crafted words and imagery. Reflection on these gifts and how they bring new insight to lived experiences create collated multi-vocal biographies. Through their collective arts-based poetic and visual inquiry they see reflections and diffractions in each other's lived stories that metaphorically provoke understandings of the pain swept into the unforgiving corners of cold, unloving universities. This work is creative resistance: to write from the body gives pearls of pleasure and joy in unloving institutions.

Welcome

Through reading this chapter we invite you to join us in a new kind of knowledge making, borne from fifty-five combined years of motherhood and fifty-nine years of active research, across two hemispheres and nineteen institutions. The space we seek to carve out here is creative, subversive and transformative. It is a canvas of becoming, where process presides over product, and truth can shift kaleidoscopically. Being and understanding one's being is an intensely emotional process. Understanding and making sense of lived experience of being a person, a mother and academic further builds on the work of Mountz, Bonds, Mansfield, Loyd, Hyndman, Walton-Roberts, ... Curran, (2015) as movement away from being automatons to a neoliberal agenda. Working collaboratively, sharing stories and through our methodology of gifting – we explore the diversity of lived experience within academic spaces and motherhood in the motherland (UK) and the colony (Australia). Through our emergent methodology (defined by our creative process of reading, listening, thinking, making and gifting) we note the spaces where our stories intersect and deviate in response to noted tensions, challenges and opportunities.

We invite you to explore our narratives, to locate yourself within them, rotating the lens to create your own patterns from our words. In so doing, you become the fifth author of this text, joining our communal process of searching, sharing and supporting. Inspired by feminist slow scholarship, to take time and to collectively care; a savoured “resistance to the accelerated timelines of the neoliberal university” (Mountz, et al 2015, p. 1238). We have rawly written our entangled lived experiences of emotional and embodied effects that are often deemed irrelevant and ignored (Ahmed, 2014) of being both mothers and academics. We held and felt these lived encounters over time. When we could claim unpressured time and space we creatively responded back with gifted crafted words and imagery of empathy,

care and awakened insights, engaging with what Puig de la Bellacasa (2012) referred to as ‘thinking-with’, in which “relations of thinking and knowing require care” (p. 198). To align with the feminine and mother, we exclusively thought with female scholarship and brought together our collective embodied lived trauma, composing multi-vocal biographies of mothering and academia, to heal, to hear and to hold embodied wisdom.

Come, turn the kaleidoscope of lived experience that is shared with you through our creative writing, gift making and giving. Through our own feminist ethic of care emerges acceptance of the individual, and a willingness to make room for their perspective with care, trust, mutual consideration, and solidarity (Held, 2005). We mother our mothering in spaces away from unloving institutions, nurturing “sustainable and flourishing relations” in place of the “survivalist or instrumental” roles into which we are so often cast (Puig de la Bellacosa, 2012, p. 198).

Coming together

We are four, who have not all met in person. Louise invited us together by instinct, a sensing of diverse mothering in academia and interest in diverse thinking, writing, making with.

Louise: At the time of receiving an invitation from Linda, Ali and Susie (Editors) to contribute a collectively written chapter on motherhood in academia, I was dealing with months of vertigo and neuralgia from institutionally triggered trauma. I had embodied disbalance. I knew writing a chapter for this book would evoke more balanced space for my authentic self. A week later I went to the *5th Artsbased research and artistic research* conference at TATE Liverpool. Helen opened the conference with a provocative spoken word piece of her lived experience of motherhood in stolen morsels of time. I felt a connection that

she dared to be performative at an academic conference. Later I was drawn to Sarah's installations of Barbie in scenes of mother as academic. Barbie's glossed smile and pristine presentation highlighted the facade working mothers earnestly struggle to present against the landscape of chaos.

I sensed Helen and Sarah would bring artsbased research, diverse perspectives and diverse experiences to such a chapter. When I first read the book proposal, I thought of my Australian friend Agli. We worked together at a university we have both since left. Over the 9 years I have known Agli I have witnessed her provide the most intensely devoted mothering to her adopted sons and come to peace with claiming her intersex identity. A story of mothering that so few know.

Helen: I remember Sarah's installation vividly. I was on stolen time – away from my son for only the fourth night ever. I felt dislocated and incomplete; a piecemeal mother, making for a piecemeal academic. For me, this tension echoed the near impossibility of being true to both teaching and research, as a mid-career academic at an institution which increasingly audits outputs across both domains. The opportunity to contribute to Sarah's discussion wall helped me bracket these feelings and become more present. Agli, I met later through her words. For me, our ensuing conversations have helped unite the competing domains of motherhood and academia, so that they become mutually enriching.

I brought to this dialogue my experience as a spoken word poet and social scientist; identities, skill sets and ways of thinking which I held as equally dislocated for over a decade. This changed when I encountered artsbased research, during a project on dementia stigma (Gregory, 2014). Here, I could be creative, performative, emotive *and* rigorously analytic.

Later, I discovered I could be collaborative and community-focused too, a combination exemplified through the ‘collaborative poetics’ method (Johnson et al, 2017, 2018). It was this method on which I presented at the conference where Louise, Sarah and I first connected (Johnson & Wimpenny, 2018), and which brought me to the creative and collaborative experience of co-authoring this chapter. For me, then, this work fulfills my drive to ‘think-with’ not only others, but also myself (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012).

Sarah: When I was exhibiting at the Liverpool Tate and struggling to reconcile the demands of family life with a challenging full-time academic career whilst writing up my doctorate. I was running on empty and felt depleted, exhausted and isolated but the opportunity to be part of such an inspiring project was too incredible to pass up.

I met Louise when she asked me to provide an English voice in a recorded piece which told the heartbreaking story of her ancestor and Helen soon after when she came to see my work and we shared experiences of the emotional pain in attempting to balance mothering and research. Agli and I got to know one another through the marvels of technology, first sharing honest written pieces then through our regular group online meetings.

Agli: Having previously collaborated with Louise (see, Phillips and Zavros 2012), I felt safe to share my lived experience. Informed by Ethics of Care (Held, 2005, Gilligan, 1993), I consciously consider how the space was created for creativity, voice, signature and authorship. It was through Louise that I first got to know Helen and Sarah. Meeting Helen and Sarah - via email and later through a Zoom meeting highlighted for me that we were all on the same page. From the start I knew that we were creating a space that would allow me to understand:

...how tension between responsibility and rights sustains the dialectic of human development is to see the integrity of two disparate modes of experience that are in the end connected [that] while an ethic of justice proceeds from the premise of equality - that everyone should be treated the same - an ethic of care rests on the premise of nonviolence - that not one should be hurt (Gilligan, 1993, p. 174).

We four have formed an epistemic community (see Hankinson Nelson, 1993) of mothers, who together are negotiating gendered/sexed epistemic phenomenological realities in academia (see Potter 1993) as our bodies working across space and time came together to share knowledge to make sense of the crisis of reason (see, Grosz 1993) and to emerge as knowers and doers. For me this connects to Puig de la Bellacasa's (2012) collective dialogic processes that promote "sustainable and flourishing relations" (p. 198).

Writing and Making Motherhood in Academia

We began by each creatively writing our personal lived experiences of mothering in academia and emailing these to the other three. This sharing was held in a space of feminist caring drawing from Puig de la Bellacasa's (2012) notion of *thinking-with* "inciting us to enlarge our ontological and political sense of kinship and alliance to dare in exercises of category transgression, of boundary redefinition that put to test the scope of humanist care" (p. 201). Through the process of sharing our raw lived experiences we thought and felt with each other, forging kinships and alliances not present before; creating transformative relations between us four. Rather than skimming over each author's writing, we sat with and held them, generating an entangled collective.

Helen: In the course of my normal working day, I sit at my desk for hours on end, relentlessly typing out my lectures, communications, and research writing. This is the space in which I work. I will stay here unmoving, be I hungry, full-bladdered, fingertip-numb or croaking-hot. But I could not work in such a stultifying way for this chapter. Instead, I left my house with notepad and pen to sit at the foot of the nearby Sussex Downs. I composed cross-legged in long, flower-straggled grass, with the reassuring weight of my writing grounding me to the earth beneath. In this way, my writing practices enabled me to reflect feminist concerns with situated, embodied and sensory forms of knowledge, which align with ways of knowing that Springgay (2012) and others have identified as inherent to mothering and motherhood. They reflect too a slowing down of my thinking and creative processes which Mountz et al (2015) argue for as part of a ‘feminist politics of resistance’ in the academy.

This was a reassembling of myself as creative woman, mother and academic; aspects of self which I compartmentalise through necessity on a daily basis. The poem I composed muses on and mourns this separation of self, the need to become less – a lesser mother, lesser wife, lesser human even - in order to carry out the work that is required of me as an academic. Yet the poem also speaks of my fight to remain whole and my refusal to deny the central place which my son has held in my life in the four years since his birth. In this sense, it is a reclamation of self and a rebellion against the constraints of a neoliberal, masculinised academy.

Tea Break

1.

He is six weeks' old,

and everything is new.
It is the first time the moon has set,
the dew has pearled,
buttercups have flexed towards the sun;
that I have sensed a tiny heartbeat,
as I type,
drumming email after email,
after grant proposal, after peer review;
tiptoed marking
over effervescent snores,
which cannot possibly resound
from such small lungs.

There is a cell that I can book
to nurse my son,
on blue-plasticed doctor's couch,
gently-staining chair.

But time starves.
So I commute from lecture hall,
to car park feed,
clock off to nappies changed on office floor.
And she quips,
“at least you have the chance
to drink your tea.
Welcome back to work.”

2.

Five months' old.

We wean him young.

Now he suckles food from plastic bags,

a grounded astronaut,

while my breasts desiccate,

no longer orbiting a pump,

for thirty thirsty minutes,

every other hour,

of every day.

I work from home when schedules allow,

but there is no quorum here.

My heart cramps with the study door.

I cannot hear him playing,

I have lectures to redraft.

I cannot hear him laughing,

I have data to transcribe.

I cannot hear him crying,

there is so much work to do.

3.

One year old.

I am a perpetual motion machine,

relentless, unstoppable, promotable.

Incomplete.

Exhaustion is my everything.

But it's our little secret,

that I woke at five,

that my mind is bleached muslin,

that the fracture forced by leaving him,

will never heal.

Sometimes, I doubt my status as his mother.

I know I will never be enough.

Today I told a colleague,

that my family comes first.

It felt like insurrection.

4.

Three years' old.

He says to me,

"My tears are like dry biscuits."

I hold him tight.

In the months after I sent this to Louise, Agli and Sarah, I received creative responses to my piece that were enormously affirming, and to find themes, emotions and experiences from my work echoing across theirs. Yet it was also disheartening that these strong, talented and sage women could feel as desperate I did, as our lives, children and academic careers span on their

own divergent spindles. Thus, I saw a strong synergy in our combined energy, restlessness, guilt, and of course love. As Sarah wrote:

1

As I begin the daily plough through a workload that overwhelms

I tell myself that I must complete three days' work in one day

If I am to have a weekend with my children.

2

He is almost sixteen now

And I think of Helen as I type

Drumming email after email,

After grant proposal after peer review

And of how some things don't change because after all this time I still feel like this.

3

Time starves.

I commute from the lecture hall,

To karate lessons,

Dropping him at his part-time job, school or friends' houses

And I think that at least we'll have the chance to talk in the car.

4

I work from home when schedules allow.

There is not enough time to be either the mother or the academic that I want to be.

*Snatched moments, a perpetual motion machine,
Relentless, unstoppable, incomplete.
Exhaustion is my expectation
And I realise that he is made in my image.
His life as crammed full as mine and that soon he won't need me at all.*

5

*Sixteen years old.
He says to me,
“See you later Mum”
And I long to hold him tight.*

Louise's gift (see Figure 1) brought a different kind of resonance, evoking a dark, dislocated chill through her crafting of an eyeball resting on biscuit crumbs at the base of a porcelain teacup.



Figure 1: Tea, biscuit, tears [gifted made response from Louise]

Agli's response, in turn, is dialogic and connective. She writes of "Mothering, caring, nurturing ... in its complexities," revealing how "words connect us across space and time."

1.

Words, move and interconnect us...

...birthmother I am not.

Words connect us across space and time.

*I do not know of early motherhood ... I dreamt of my babies first breath... I give
thanks to another...*

Tears fall.

Mothers... in their creativity as they take their place and make room for others too...

2.

*I hold my breath, as I read your words...mine hold no such purpose. I read
transfixed. I celebrate you in all you do.*

I feel my guilty....I was pulled away...thoughts...floating

*Motherhood...complex... I wonder what if... I felt less than...yet I am mother,
different but the same.*

Our energy...a drum beat upon this earthly realm...you are not alone...

3.

Muslin shadows fall across my space. I see mothers moving to the beat...

*The drum beats a soundscape (mother-child-mother-child) ... resounding waves....a
life force.*

United. Together stronger than alone.

Together they dance...setting the tune for what is to come.

4.

I see... you hold on. I have dreamt to be where you are with my own.

Reading your words...tears fall!

Mine first is not a baby any more.

I hold on tight...inside...not ok to hug in public you know.

Today I pushed him into his new world.

Tears fall...

Sarah: I feel lucky to be able to provide for my family doing something that has so much potential to inspire and fulfil me. The downside is that I never have the luxury of just working on one project and demands and deadlines appear so thick and fast that I sometimes feel like a skittle in a bowling alley just scrambling up onto my feet again only to be knocked over again. I fantasize about sitting down and talking to my kids about their life, just sitting and concentrating, really having the time to understand how they are feeling.

Working creatively felt like a break from the day job and being able to collaborate with other mothers in academia was a rare treat. Day after day though I would clear space mentally, emotionally and physically to enable a chunk of time but this was always eaten up by other things, a weeping student, a stressed colleague, traffic jams, and phone calls. Predictably most of this was written in the middle of the night when it was finally quiet enough to think. As a mother in academia I have learned to survive on remarkably little sleep.

On The Pain of Motherhood

Becoming

My first child is finally born. I gaze at him and finally understand what I have been told again and again; that the love I will feel will be “like nothing I have ever known before”. Four years later; a daughter. Her fist grips my finger. From this day on I will only be grateful.

Exhaustion

I have never known tiredness like this. I push the trolley up and down the aisles like a zombie while my son screams; “down, down, down!”. He is toddling now and fully embracing his new-found freedom. I have secured him in the child-seat, where I can see him, keep him safe and in desperation have bribed him with a gingerbread man which I have not yet paid for. He does not like to be caged and arches his little back, tears of rage streaming down his face. He is also tired. Soon he will sleep and I will have to work; writing if I can, cleaning the house if I can't. If I can't then I will have to write tonight, in between feeds, when the house is dark and quiet. It is the only time I will have.

Guilt

When the children arrive at nursery they must find the laminated label with their name on it and then blu-tac it to either the sunshine, the rainbow or the thunder cloud displayed by the door to signal to their key worker how they feel that morning. My daughter has chosen the thunder cloud again. She does not like nursery. She refuses to kiss me goodbye turning her back in silent, dignified remonstrance.

When I get to work I cry silently in the toilet cubicle. I have emergency mascara in my bag for these situations. I use it most days.

Shame

We are running late and my son does not want to hurry. I unsuccessfully endeavour to reason with him before resorting to various attempts at bribery but he steadfastly rejects his pushchair as he has decided that he wants to walk. He toddles unsteadily and incredibly slowly, stopping often to gaze in wonder at his surroundings, bending his little knees to pick up a leaf or a conker turning it over and over in his small, chubby hands in studied contemplation.

He does not see the need for deadlines and timetables. Why should he? I have to deliver a lecture in less than an hour and must drop him off first at my mother's. She will remind me that I will be late yet again. The students will be waiting impatiently in the lecture theatre. I think they can tell that I'm not coping.

I swing my laptop bag, my workbag and the baby bag onto my back kneeling by the pushchair in the gravel, trying to manoeuvre my son into the seat before employing a desperate chopping motion to persuade him to bend in the middle. He is incensed and protests loudly. A stranger gawks in horror; disgusted. I attempt a conciliatory smile. "People like you do not deserve to be mothers" she observes. I suspect that she might be right.

Helen replied with an 'I' poem¹ which disrupted my story to focus on my subjectivity, providing life affirming validation. To feel heard is such an important part of human experience.

I gaze.

I feel.

I am primal.

I am a mother.

I can't.

¹ A technique drawn from Gilligan's 'listening guide' method (see for example Gilligan et al., 2003).

I am.

I will.

I push.

I have.

I can.

I have not.

I will.

I can.

I can't.

I can't.

I will.

I will.

I hear.

I pray.

I demand.

I believe.

I say.

I know.

I would die.

I love.

I am.

I hear.

I excuse.

I do not want.

I want.

I want.

I remember.

I have.

I get to work.

I cry.

I use.

I long.

I have given up.

I didn't.

I can't.

I have begged.

I unsuccessfully endeavour.

I have to deliver.

I'm not coping.

I swing.

I growl.

I attempt.

Louise made this reponse (see Figure 2)...



Figure 2: Entwined by pains of motherhood

And I identified with the fragments of negative thoughts depicted by the words on torn paper intertwined with the family pictures and memories of beach holidays where I could finally spend time with my children unencumbered by cares.

Agli's response gave me a sense of understanding, a belonging to a group of mothers in academia who were travelling the same, well-trodden path.

To Becoming...

It is a sin to love...to feel...to be...

Courage flows, vibrate into this troubling world ... words against the machine,

I hear your cry ... "primal, fierce, a tigress" ... a roar ...you are a survivor, mother, wife...

To Exhaustion...

The labour of becoming...exhausting...their cries fill your ears...

Awakened, alive... tigers ...you strive... demanding the world take note...I feel your strength...you find the means to carve a pathways forward.

To Guilt...

A mother's guilt seems to never ending...the machine...demands...but tears renew.

Your mask in place, you face the day... planning...building... yes, there is a cost...but cautiously... a reflexive movement finds the space to be...to play...to dream.

Louise: I greatly admire Helen, Sarah and Agli's poetic writing and really struggled to locate an uninterrupted patch of time to devote to writing my lived reality as a mother and academic. Not just any grab of time. I needed to feel clear and strong to be creative. I was stuck in the heavy fog of dark depression invoked by the lack of recognition and value of my work within a research intensive sandstone university at the cost of parenting and self-care

sacrifices. In time I eventually wrote, because I felt I was letting the beautiful mothers I had brought together down. I had a commitment to honour. I rawly wrote from 22 years of motherhood and 12 years of academia.

I started my PhD when my twins were 4 and my eldest 9.

I would make the most of when they were at kindergarten and school and asleep. The glow from the computer screen and tapping of keyboard permeated our bedroom into the wee hours of the morning. I wish I was sleeping too, but I have deadlines². This word has pushed me a long for years.

I am imprisoned by these lines – they stop my spontaneity, and much needed rest and play. I adhere to deadlines with the same vigilance that I fear for my life. I used to be an early childhood teacher; I could play. When I talk about playing – one of my twins looks at me stunned: “you don’t play”.

Towards the end of writing my thesis, I stole a Sunday to retreat to campus to rid the lead weight from our lives. The next day working at home on a laptop perched on a plank of wood between shelves in our bedroom, I glanced out the window at my elderly neighbour’s house. I noticed multiple muddy splats alongside the outer wall of her house. I stared at the earthy prints, conjuring explanations of how they came to be.

When each family member returned home I asked them if they knew how the mud splats came to be.

Sheepishly C & M revealed they were throwing mud balls.

Wild unruly children = product of neglectful mother.

² The first known use of ‘deadline’ was in 1864 to infer “a line drawn within or around a prison that a prisoner passes at the risk of being shot” (Merriam Webster).

The clouds of shame hung heavy. We went to make peace with our neighbour...

I succumbed to societal patterning and sent my children to school – the local public school for community. It is my greatest regret of parenthood. I raised my children to be free spirits to follow their interests. Foregrounding inquiry rather than disciplined didactic academic acquisition.

And so, each of my children became constructed as deficit learners by the schooling system.

Meeting after meeting

Assessment after assessment

Therapy after therapy

And no one showed any interest in the body of knowledge I possessed as an education academic.

My children loath/ed school and it's chains that lingered (aka homework).

When I started at a research intensive University in 2012 I had the greatest number of dependent children and still do. The competition of performance pushed, slapped and forced me to work evenings and weekends to keep up. I then calculated my disadvantage – parenting was consuming 6 hours per day.

I learnt to just do and accept my circumstances. To cry and scream behind the locked door of my office after yet another school call imposing unjustified disciplinary action on one of my children. I've lost count how many times they have been suspended. I viscerally sense how my children have been constructed by teachers and administrators at their primary and secondary schools. I perpetually hear how family members and friends' children perform so

well at school. And I perpetually hear in academic spaces that I am not good enough. And so, I declare that I have failed in both mothering and academia and I desperately long to put my sealskin on and swim far, far away, but the dead line holds me.

I felt failure in my writing, in my mothering, and in being an academic. “...herein lies the dilemma for mothers in academia – we want to excel in both realms but there is no structural support for those goals” (Fothergill & Feltey, 2003, p. 17).

Failure is just another name for much of real life...Who set the bar so high that most of our attempts to sail gracefully over it on the viewless wings of Poesy end in an undignified scramble or a nasty fall into the mud? Who told us we had to succeed at any cost? (Atwood, 2013).

Failure is hidden, shamed and silently grieved in academia. Mud is reality. Mothering is muddy. By drawing from feminist ethics of care and its corresponding claim for slow scholarship (Mountz et al., 2015) through our slow moving uncensored conversations, writing, and making, the raw, the hidden, the pain—the conflicts see daylight.

And so I came to see more in my writing and lived experiences as Helen, Sarah and Agli gifted to me their responses and I felt the soothing warmth of the relationality of thinking-with the dual identities of mother and academic in our collective.

Helen highlighted the resonant threads through ‘blackout’ poetry³:

I started asleep.

I have deadlines.

³ often associated with the Beat Generation.

*Pushed along for years
at the risk of being shot.
I am imprisoned.
Stop my rest,
I adhere to vigilance.
I used to be a child/Teacher –
I could play.*

*Towards the end
I stole a desk,
a plank of wood,
conjuring explanations,
throwing mud balls -.
Wild unruly children,
clouds of shame.*

I succumbed.

*My greatest regret
foregrounding didactic academic acquisition,
so my children
became constructed as deficit learners*

*Meeting, after assessment,
after therapy,*

no one showed any interest

in the body I possess,

chains that linger.

Still the competition of performance

pushed, slapped

and forced me to keep up,

calculated my disadvantage –

just do,

accept,

cry and scream behind locked doors,

after yet another disciplinary action,

suspended viscerally.

I am not good enough.

I have failed to swim.

The dead line holds me.

Sarah dissected, distilled and listed to foreground key drivers of my colliding identities of mother and academic:

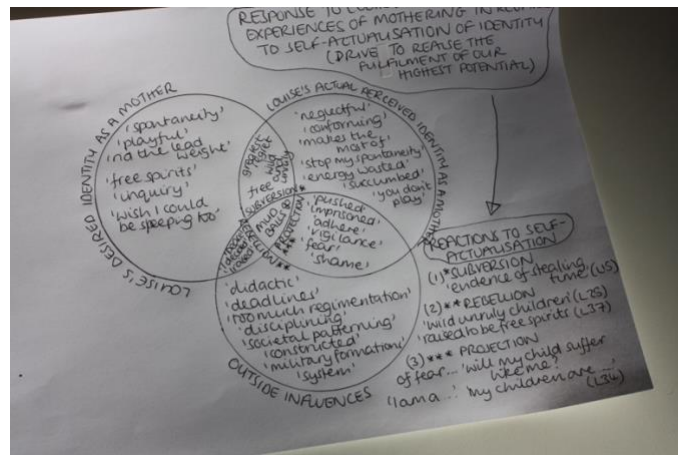


Figure 3: Sarah's response to Louise's writing

Agli witnessed and held my pain and suffering. Empathising, seeing my gifts and offering (re)visioned hope:

Your words touch deeply... You set fire to me and give me life

Deadlines. A word not of your making...and the prison it shapes around you. I see you pulling at the bars hoping to set yourself free.

...what are you looking for my darling friend...I admire your industry.

Your words...vessels filled with pain.

I see you looking outward...reaching for hope... I cry out to you...does she hear my words... are the deadlines so entrenched.

Motherhood is wisdom... wisdom forged in moments of trouble, tension, conflict and pain

I see your knowing gaze...I see you on your path...

Mud pies mark your pathway...playfulness is your way

They laugh...do you hear them...they invite you to laugh too at this crazy world.

I see the mud ball in your hand...take aim dear friend..one, two, three...

*Mother, teacher, activist...transforming redefining...showing the way through your
storying.*

*Deadlines form around all of us. Neoliberalism chomping at our bodies, hearts and
minds.*

*Motherhood imprisoned...the academe... neoliberal deadlines defining good and bad.
Your valued question...but how do you not fold. Motherhood redefined as you forge
onward.*

Not good enough!!!

Who defines 'not good enough'?

*Who sets out the ruler for being woman...mother...academic...human? The ruler
skirt I wear.*

*I see you putting on your sealskin, I see you swimming deeper into the
unknown...your power is internal.*

I hear your roar, you turn...you say...

Agli: Academic work, in the ethnographic, auto-ethnographic and critical auto-ethnographic space, bring to the surface tensions, challenges and opportunities that call forward action. Not an automaton, I wrote as a person, mother and academic free from institutional constraints.

Working from a feminist post-structural perspective (St Pierre & Pillow, 2000) I embrace social constructivist grounded theory as an iterative and mindful method that acknowledges multiple truths (Charmaz, 2006) that allowed me to acknowledge and work through my own bias and to be open to seeing my perspectives as “one view among many” (p.54).

As an intersex person, embracing the role of mother, working within the academic spaces as “the other”, and developing a mindful praxis, I write with a freedom seeking to express and trouble ‘*foundational ontologies, methodologies, and epistemologies*’ (St Pierre & Pillow, 2000, p. 2) that is also an expression of care supported by the work of Held (2005), Noddings (2003), and Gilligan (1993) created a space for me to think and write authentically. I draw on embodied, felt and ecological ways of knowing in poetic reflexivity about the intersecting themes that emerge from my lived experience.

Fractured tale ... of academe, of parenthood, of trauma, of us.

Of Academe,

...awake, i hold the shield high (forged from lived experience of - war, migration, pathologization of my body)...facing the tension of the day begins,

... i waited for you to reveal yourself, friend or foe in a game with shifting rules subject to one’s sex marker – f/m...

...being intersex...I feel I am neither...is being me a problem.

...i shield my soul – figuring out the rules for being, belonging and becoming ... in this tango, moving with the push and pull...a tension...endured...

...survival is holding the tension, not breaking...

...tears burn, the view obstructed...

Academe is at times a heartless master - Darwinian in its philosophy, its 24/7 clock ticks on, setting the beat.

Of parenthood...

Coming into mother...re-imagining...re-defining...storylines form – footwork along a path with heart – exhausted, the body yield...hopes of being, belonging and becoming animate soul-work...wholeheartedness defined

...the ground shifts, lava beneath my feet, threatening to consume...

...will I burn. i feel my body tensing...

...in flow - my creativity blossoms, fruitful and nurturing...

Of us...

...imprinted...

...always there...

...mummy...

...it cuts the chaos of my thoughts...

...yes darling, how can i help...

...mummy, i need...

Children's need for 'mother' is intense, all consuming. Academe has had to wait⁴. But like a hungry lover it pulls at me – as I am pulled away.

Of parenthood (cont.)...

...defining my being – driving and motivating me...

...i chose them,

...their needs immediate, loud, interrupting...

...together we've struggled...you had no place for me...you said...you made me choose...

...i dance with them, we roll – in our rhythmic pull and push,

I hold my breath – storied lives, ponds of tears – creeks to rivers out to sea and back to shore.

Of trauma...

... claws upon me...sculpturing my being...

...my body yields... I connect to their need for 'mother'...

...our tango – our beat..

...falling, falling, falling...

...sweat mixed with tears becomes the sea from which I awaken...skin thickened.

⁴ Agli has had two one year breaks from academe (after graduating with her PhD at the age of 39) as well as periods of choosing not to work or work part time or has taken up sessional work. This has been in order to take care of their children due to the trauma experienced as adopted children as a result of disrupted attachment. See, <http://www.socialworkerstoolbox.com/lets-learn-together-guide-parents-teachers-adopted-children-primary-school/>

My love affair with academe, another war of sorts...shapes and defines...what of me...my work... a 46XY Swyers body – fractured – scattered – anaesthetised – awakened – I drifted, greyed and weathered – I landed on this shore.

Of us again...

...mum can we read...

...yes darling - putting my pyjamas on...

...i hear movement - the eldest settling – just turned 12...

...we read - cuddled on my bed - I breathe...

Sarah's thoughtful gift brought insight, re-framing a fractured tale as three inter-connected representations of self-hood - in its process of being, belonging and becoming:

Survival:

Transforming, shaping, I battle to birth myself: being, belonging, becoming. Finally awakening, I land weakened and weathered on this shore.

Hypervigilant still, but gradually finding flow, I fight, my shield held high, to make the most of so much potential. Determined to reveal myself without shame despite your endlessly shifting game-rules.

My love affair with the heartless continues through my work. I long to belong here.

Salvation:

You have imprinted. I am struggling, exhausted, threatened, challenged like you and by you. Intensely nurturing your all-consuming needs defines my existence and makes me. I become mother.

We have chosen one another. We belong.

Louise's evocative sculptured gifted response (see Figure 4), is provocative and enables a re-imagining of what it could be to be intersex and feminine, giving flight to feminine creativity like motherhood.



Figure 4: (Re)creating/ (re)birthing mothering

From Helen, I received a gift, in the form of a letter, an act of active reading and reflecting back to me a compassionate knowing of me and the relationship between self and other.

Dear Agli,

I met you through your words, and know that you are beautiful. Pressure-cast like shattered glass, pounded into gemstones by the sea. Your 'not normal' iridescently-interred beneath a thousand dusty pebbles. You are beautiful in your becoming. You will not be consumed.

I hear your trauma too, carried in the throats of hungry gulls, the anger of the ocean; its desolation. In the tension of water, breaking onto rocks, I taste salt tears you can never wash away, tracing something of my story in those scars.

There will be time to sleep, to lay our towels in sandy hollows. But for now, we know no rest, only omnipresent vigilance, as we crayon our complexities of being.

On receiving these, bonds of sisterhood were woven, into the fabric of our being, as we each felt each other's pain, struggle, joy and madness. The process for me, the weaving of ourselves together with poetry and creativity, creates a movement beyond us to embrace our readers.

Giftng: Responding to each other

Reading each others' stories built kinship and alliances of motherhood in academia, as we thought and felt with each other (Puig De La Bellacasa, 2012). Drawing from feminist methodologies, we wrote and made from our bodies that were offered as a gift that "enables the other rather than appropriating the other's difference in order to construct and glorify the self through rigorous and masterful knowledge" (Phillips et al., 2014, p. 324). Shifting away from masculinised academic language such as dissemination, in which academics 'sow their seeds', we collectively birth and nurture ideas, thoughts, provocations, inspirations, feelings

and the becoming-human (Fotaki et al., 2014). By responding to each others' personal writing on being both mothers and academics we hold a relational space for creation, writing and sharing, thoughtful heartfelt gifts giving birth to understanding. Our gifted responses are each an act to touch the other. "All touching entails an infinite alterity, so that touching the other is touching all others, including the "self," and touching the "self" entails touching the strangers within" (Barad, 2012, p. 7).

In responding to each other's mothering writing, we listened and held and crafted what we were invited to sense, bringing to the fore what was most resonant, sharing elements of alignment, and making visible what perhaps our sister could not, in that moment, see. These are customized gifts to each other, dedicated to one mother but resonating with many mothers. Carefully selected, materials and words were gifted. We moved beyond the standardised, faceless observations of lived experience (Code, 1993), gifting to each other our stories as subversive embodied acts (Butler, 2006). What emerged were poetic forms seeking to raise awareness of the personal, spiritual, political and global issues (Held 2005) facing mothers working within academic spaces. We gave gifts with compassion and received gifts with openness and learning.

Collective Making

We then collated our gifts with our personal writing to form "multiple trajectories representing different times in our lives" (Mountz et al., 2015, p. 1239) recognising that our stories were not singular stories, but were held, felt and experienced by each other. Caring for, thinking-with (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012) and weaving with each other's work, we, like the Great Lakes Feminist Geography Collective, "attend to the interpersonal and collective conditions that underpin knowledge production conducted with care" (Mountz et al., p.

1254). In a way our work adopts a feminist collective biography approach (e.g., see Davies & Gannon, 2006) welcoming creativity, mixed modes and sensuality to “have effects, produce realignments, shake things up” (Grosz, 1995, p. 127) by merging our writing/making and insight.

Helen: My final piece shows the original poetic autoethnography held, with hands and heart, by my three co-authors (see Figure 5). This represents both the echoing of recurrent themes over different hemispheres, careers and spans of mother/child-hood, and the love, support and self-affirmation which the sharing of our narratives birthed. These themes resound throughout explorations of motherhood and academia (see e.g., Isgro and Castañeda, 2015; Trafi-Prats, 2018), speaking of: time stretched to breaking point; exhaustion and energy; feelings of failure and guilt; and the almost irreconcilable conflict between a mother’s open, warm love and the blinkered displacement of work lives. Combining our voices in this way contests the model of knowledge *seeking* as an isolated, competitive, practice aimed at producing a fixed, singular product, and emphasises instead knowledge *creation* as communal, interactive and dynamic processes. Thus, we resist an individualized form of knowledge, seeking to think within a network of relations (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012).



Figure 5: Teabreak embrace

Louise: Sarah’s gifted response placed mudballs at the centre, they were the catalyst for much of my mothering identity. When my boys were primary school age I often shared that it was like living in *Lord of the Flies*. Agli nudged me to take the mudball in my own hand and take aim. So I did. “Matter: the Mud: the Mother. She transforms herself” (Sjöö & Mor, 1987, p. 51). I made mud, I held and shaped it in my hands. And branded the conflicting intentions (that Sarah highlighted) on my wrist: rebellion, subversion, protection. I found my strength. Helen’s ‘blackout’ poem of my original piece highlighted the weight of mothering in unloving institutions circumnavigating my mudladen fist. Agli’s knowing witnessing of my life, speaks to me from all directions (see Figure 6). These gifts help me to own my strength as mother and academic, fading my failings.

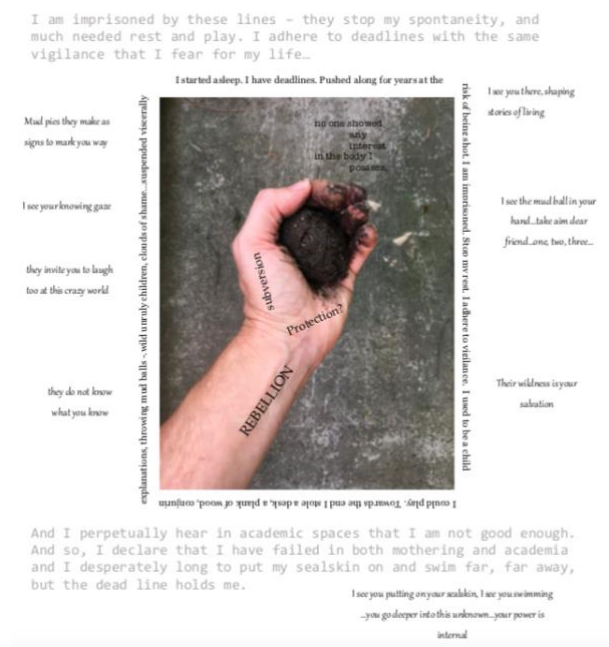


Figure 6: Mud mattering of mothering

Agli: I embraced the metaphor of journey early in my academic work (Zavros 2009), which I now add to including my lived experience as mother. Journeying (see Figure 7) brings together the wisdom I have gained from our collaboration. Louise’s clay Yoni, (ancient symbol of femaleness and fertility) along with Sarah’s insightful reframing and Helen’s compassionate words that remind me of my resilience, informed my re-imagining, making and writing.

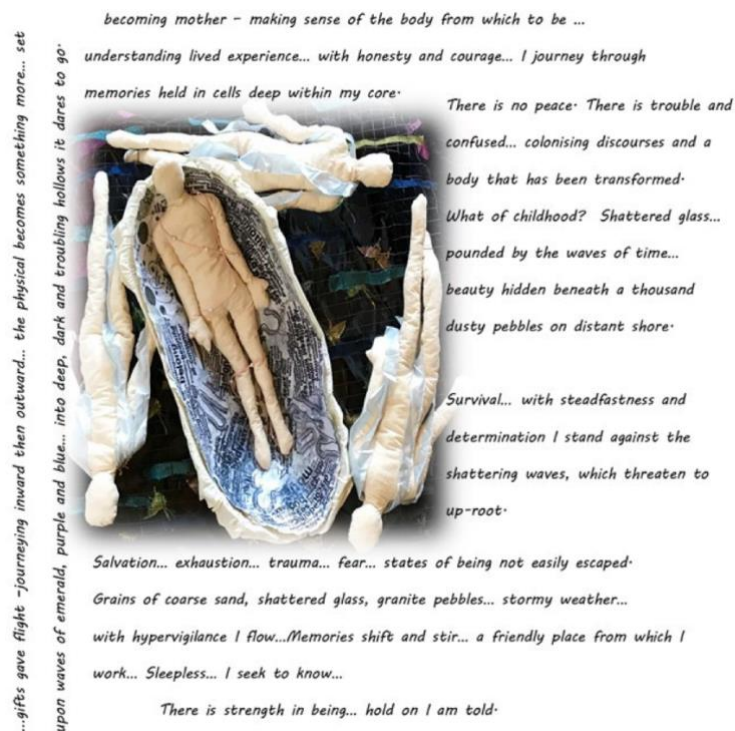


Figure 7 Journeying

Journeying, (four hand made fabric dolls, a vessel made of paper mache set upon a dark ocean) represents compassion and wisdom – reflective of our interactions and dialogue. I set one of the figures in the vessel (wrapped with a string of pearls) – the other three outside the vessel, afford them rest and safe passage. Re-storative wisdom gained from making and storying - the string of pearls – enables the journeying onward into uncharted waters.

Sarah: Each gift helped me to understand mothering in a different way. My response (see Figure 8) depicts the loneliness of being a mother in the academy and our collective experience of ongoing incessant glued-to-the-computer work. I am often too overwhelmed by emails to leave the office and seek the connections that I crave preferring instead to “keep calm and carry on” to get home to my children. Yet, I need those connections and this work has shown me that there is sisterhood and understanding to be found. We came together as four mothers from different parts of the world and different backgrounds to provide that connection and to give each other some much needed strength to carry on.



Figure 8: Working Late

Departing words

The academy is a patriarchal construction, which follows the patriarchal belief that all of life is created for men to use. As mothers, creators and sustainers of life, we create, we support, we hold, we gift, we care, we feed... We are there in the mud of real life, with the trouble, with the relationality of trouble and care (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012).

Developing our methodology of gifting is offered as a shift in perspective and a move toward “differentiated comprehensive, and reflective forms of thought [that] appears in women’s responses to both actual and hypothetical dilemmas” (Gilligan, 1993, p. 73). The process of developing a new methodology, one that is organic, holistic, and liberatory - that includes creative writing, sharing our writing within our epistemic community, and responding through “gifting” and “receiving of gifts” from which we then collated new work becomes our reflexive praxis as mothers in academia, through conversation over virtual spaces that define 21st century academic work. From the outset we worked through a common desire to build care, trust, mutual consideration, and solidarity (Held, 2005) as central to this methodology. This process of listening and holding each other’s mothering stories and creating carefully composed gifted responses produced treasures and time to savour and comfort – a much welcomed reprieve from the academic machine. Drawing from “a feminist inspired vision of caring...in vital ethico-affective everyday practical doings that engage with the inescapable troubles of interdependent existences” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012, p. 199), we gift this idea to you dear readers as a panacea for the cold harsh culture of academia; a call for widespread rippled action of acknowledging one another (including all the invisible others that make our work possible), and how our work relies on one another.

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